The Scarlet Letter

INTRO

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE

Hawthorne's father died at sea when Hawthorne was just four years old. His mother raised him alone in Salem. He went on to attend Bowdoin College, from which he graduated in 1824. He married Sophia Peabody in 1842, and the two enjoyed a long loving marriage that produced three children. Hawthorne could not support the family as a writer, so he worked as a surveyor for the Custom House in Salem from 1846-1849. Hawthorne befriended other now-famous writers throughout his life, including Longfellow, Thoreau, and Melville. He died in 1864 after spending six of his last years in Europe.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Scarlet Letter paints a very unflattering portrait of the Puritans, a religious group that dominated late seventeenth-century English settlement in Massachusetts. Puritanism began in England during the reign of Queen Elizabeth (1558-1603). The name "Puritanism" came from the group's intent to purify the Church of England by making government and religious practice conform more closely to the word of God. The Puritans were often persecuted in England, and a group of them sailed to the New World on the Mayflower in 1620 in search of a place to practice their religion without interference. Though today Puritans are often thought of as the foundation of American society, Hawthorne criticizes the Puritans' harsh religion and society.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

The literary movement known as Transcendentalism flourished during the 1830s and 1840s, primarily in Massachusetts. The Transcendentalists believed in the power of the human mind to shape and determine experience. They favored a more personal view of religion in which people could connect directly with God. The Transcendental view of religion stood in stark contrast to the practices of groups like the Puritans, who believed in strict societal governance of religion. Transcendentalism's most famous works are Thoreau's *Walden* (1854) and Emerson's Essays, most notably "Nature" (1836). Though Hawthorne is not considered a Transcendentalist, many of the movement's central tenets appear in his work.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *The Scarlet Letter*
- **When Written:** 1848-1850
- **Where Written:** Salem, Massachusetts
- **When Published:** 1850
- **Literary Period:** Transcendentalism
- **Genre:** Novel
- **Setting:** Boston, Massachusetts in the 1640s
- **Climax:** Dimmesdale's confession and death
- **Antagonist:** Roger Chillingworth; the Puritans
- **Point of View:** Third person omniscient

EXTRA CREDIT

Hawthorne and the Salem Witch Trials: Nathaniel Hawthorne was a direct descendent of John Hathorne, (1641-1717), a Puritan justice of the peace. Justice Hathorne is best known for his role as the lead judge in the Salem Witch Trials, in which he sentenced numerous innocent people to death for allegedly practicing witchcraft. Nathaniel added a "w" to his name to distance himself from his infamous ancestor.

PLOT SUMMARY

The Scarlet Letter begins with a prelude in which an unnamed narrator explains the novel's origin. While working at the Salem Custom House (a tax collection agency), the narrator discovered in the attic a manuscript accompanied by a beautiful scarlet letter "A." After the narrator lost his job, he decided to develop the story told in the manuscript into a novel. *The Scarlet Letter* is that novel.

The novel is set in seventeenth-century Boston, a city governed by strict Puritan law. The story begins as **Hester Prynne**, the novel's protagonist, is led out of a prison carrying an infant, named **Pearl**, in her arms. A bright red "A" is embroidered on her chest. A crowd waits expectantly as Hester is forced to climb up a scaffold to endure public shame for her sin. While on the scaffold, Hester is terrified to recognize her estranged husband, **Chillingworth**, in the crowd. He recognizes her too, and is shocked. Chillingworth pretends not to know Hester, and learns her story from a man in the crowd: she was married to an English scholar who was supposed to follow her to Boston but never showed up. After two years she fell into sin, committing the adultery that resulted in her baby and the scarlet "A" on her breast. Chillingworth predicts the unknown man will be found out, but when the beloved local Reverend **Arthur Dimmesdale** commands Hester to reveal the man's name, she refuses and is sent back to her prison cell. Chillingworth poses as a doctor to get inside the prison to speak with Hester, and there forces her to promise never to reveal that he's her husband.

Three years pass. Hester is let out of prison and moves to the outskirts of Boston, near the forest. She makes a living as a seamstress, though the people who employ her still shun her. Hester refuses to tell Pearl what the scarlet letter signifies, and Pearl becomes obsessed with the letter. Meanwhile, Chillingworth is working in Boston as a physician, though he has no formal medical training. One of his patients is Dimmesdale, who has fallen ill with heart trouble. Chillingworth moves in with Dimmesdale to care for him full-time and begins to suspect a connection between Dimmesdale's heart ailment and Hester's crime. When he discovers that Dimmesdale has carved a mark over his heart that resembles Hester's scarlet letter, Chillingworth realizes that Dimmesdale is Hester's lover. Chillingworth decides to torment and expose Dimmesdale.

Under Chillingworth's cruel care, Dimmesdale's health deteriorates. Dimmesdale's guilt for committing and concealing adultery causes him profound emotional suffering. He even starves and whips himself as punishment. One night Dimmesdale mounts the same scaffold upon which Hester was publicly shamed. At just that moment, Hester and Pearl pass by and join Dimmesdale on the scaffold. A meteor lights the sky in the shape of a red "A" and illuminates Chillingworth standing nearby.

Hester decides she must help Dimmesdale, and pleads with Chillingworth to stop tormenting him. Chillingworth acknowledges that he's become cruel and wicked, but argues that he's actually protecting Dimmesdale by not revealing his secret to the public. Hester then takes matters into her own hands: she intercepts Dimmesdale in the forest and tells him Chillingworth's true identity. She convinces Dimmesdale to flee with her and Pearl to Europe, and they make plans to take a ship the day after Dimmesdale is scheduled to deliver an important sermon. Dimmesdale delivers the sermon (the best of his life). However, he realizes he's dying and won't make it to Europe. He mounts the scaffold and asks Hester and Pearl to join him. He confesses his sin to the crowd and bares his chest, revealing a scarlet letter carved into his own skin. He dies as Pearl kisses him for the first time.

Hester and Pearl leave Boston. Chillingworth dies a year after Dimmesdale, leaving Pearl a small fortune as an inheritance. Many years later, Hester returns to her cabin on the outskirts of town. She still wears her letter "A." Pearl has married into money in Europe and writes to Hester on occasion. Hester remains in Boston until her death and is buried alongside Dimmesdale. Their shared tombstone bears a letter "A."

CHARACTERS

Hester Prynne — The protagonist of the novel, Hester is married to **Roger Chillingworth** and has an affair with **Arthur Dimmesdale**. The affair produces a daughter, **Pearl**. Hester plays many roles in *The Scarlet Letter*: devoted mother, abandoned lover, estranged wife, religious dissenter, feminist, and outcast, to name just a few. Perhaps her most important role is that of an iconoclast, one who opposes established conventions. Hester is not just a rebel, she's a glorified rebel, and Hawthorne uses her to criticize the Puritan's strict society. He portrays Hester fondly, as a woman of strength, independence, and kindness, who stands up to the judgments and constraints of her society. Though society tries to demean and disgrace her, Hawthorne emphasizes that Hester never looked more attractive as when she first emerged from prison wearing the scarlet letter.

Pearl — The illegitimate daughter of **Hester Prynne** and **Arthur Dimmesdale**. Pearl serves as a symbol of her mother's shame *and* triumph. At one point the narrator describes Pearl as "the scarlet letter endowed with life." Like the letter, Pearl is the public consequence of Hester's very private sin. Yet also like the scarlet letter, Pearl becomes Hester's source of strength. Pearl defines Hester's identity and purpose and gives Hester a companion to love. Although she often struggles to understand Pearl's rebelliousness and devilish spirit, Hester never wavers in her loving devotion to Pearl. Pearl, an outcast, is drawn to other outcasts, such as **Mistress Hibbins** and her witch friends. Pearl's affinity for the occult associates her character with sin and evil, but Pearl is first and foremost a product of love, not just sin. Her rumored happiness and success as an adult in Europe make her character a symbol of the triumph of love over a repressed and oppressive society.

Arthur Dimmesdale — A well respected Boston reverend who has an affair with **Hester Prynne** and is the secret father of **Pearl**. Shy, retiring, and well loved and respected by his public, Dimmesdale is too frightened and selfish to reveal his sin and bear the burden of punishment with Hester. Yet at the same time, Dimmesdale secretly punishes himself for his sin by fasting and whipping himself. Ultimately the suffering and punishment he endures, though self-inflicted, proves far worse than Hester's or Pearl's, suggesting that betrayal and selfishness are greater sins than adultery. Dimmesdale's guilty conscience overwhelms him like a plague, robbing him of his health and preventing him from raising his daughter. His eventual confession comes too late, and he dies a victim of his own pride.

Roger Chillingworth — The old scholar who **Hester Prynne** met and married before coming to Boston. Chillingworth is a forbidding presence. Even his name reflects his haunting, ice-cold aura. Hester's relationship with Chillingworth, her actual husband, contrasts sharply with her relationship with **Dimmesdale**, her lover. Chillingworth is an older man whom she married for reasons other than love. Dimmesdale is a beloved reverend with whom she had an affair out of love and irrepressible desire. Chillingworth recognizes this difference and punishes Hester and Dimmesdale covertly by tormenting

Dimmesdale almost to the point of killing him. Meanwhile, he hypocritically makes Hester swear not to reveal his true identity as her husband in order to avoid the humiliation of being associated with their scandalous affair. In the end, by tormenting Dimmesdale, Chillingworth transforms himself into a sick and twisted man, a kind of fiend.

The Narrator — The unnamed narrator is inspired to write *The Scarlet Letter* after discovering the scarlet letter and fragments of its story in an attic of the Custom House. He describes the novel as a tale of "human frailty and sorrow" and encourages the reader to heed its moral. Throughout the novel, the narrator favors **Hester** against the Puritans who persecute her. His writing often reads as if he's pained to have to tell such a sad story that involves the downfall of innocent victims at the hands of an oppressive society.

Mistress Hibbins — **Governor Bellingham**'s sister. She invites **Hester** to a witches' meeting in the woods and becomes the object of **Pearl**'s fascination. She speaks often of the "Black Man," another name for the Devil. She is executed for practicing witchcraft about a year after Dimmesdale dies. Her death shows how merciless Puritan society had become in the name of piety and propriety: the Governor would even order the execution of his own sister.

Governor Bellingham — The governor of Boston and the brother of **Mistress Hibbins**. Bellingham conducts himself like an aristocrat, enjoying money, luxury, and the privileges of power. Yet when it comes to the actions of others, Governor Bellingham punishes any behavior that does not fit with the strict Puritan rules of behavior. This makes him a hard-hearted hypocrite. For instance, even while employing **Hester** to do fancy needlepoint for him, he tries to take **Pearl** from her, arguing that as an adulterer she's an unfit mother. Later, he convicts and executes his own sister of practicing witchcraft.

John Wilson — A jovial and grandfatherly English pastor who is loved for his kindness and benevolence. He serves as a mentor to **Dimmesdale**, though his somber and severe preaching style differs sharply from Dimmesdale's calm compassionate approach.

Jonathan Pue — The narrator's predecessor as Surveyor of the Salem Custom House. Pue wrote the original narrative about the scarlet letter, which the narrator discovered and turned into *The Scarlet Letter*.

THEMES

In LitCharts each theme gets its own color and number. Our color-coded theme boxes make it easy to track where the themes occur throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, use the numbers instead.

1 SIN

The Puritans believed people were born sinners. Puritan preachers depicted each human life as suspended by a string over the fiery pit of hell. As a result, the Puritans maintained strict watch over themselves and their fellow townspeople, and sins such as adultery were punishable by death. **Hester** is spared execution only because the Puritans of Boston decided it would benefit the community to transform her into a "living sermon against sin." But just as Hester turns the physical scarlet letter that she is forced to wear into a beautifully embroidered object, through the force of her spirit she transforms the letter's symbolic meaning from shame to strength.

Hester's transformation of the scarlet letter's meaning raises one of *The Scarlet Letter*'s most important questions: What does it mean to sin, and who are the novel's real sinners? Hester's defiant response to her punishment and her attempts to rekindle her romance with **Dimmesdale** and flee with him to Europe shows that she never considered her affair with Dimmesdale to be a sin. The narrator supports Hester's innocence and instead points the finger at the novel's two *real* sinners: Dimmesdale and **Chillingworth**. Chillingworth's sin was tormenting Dimmesdale almost to the point of death; Dimmesdale's was abandoning Hester to lead a lonely life without the man she loved.

2 INDIVIDUALITY AND CONFORMITY

As an adulterer, **Hester** has broken Puritan society's harsh and strict rules. Puritan society demanded conformity because it considered any breach of that conformity a threat to its security and its religion. Hester doesn't conform and she suffers the consequences: the townspeople punish, shun, and humiliate her. The town seeks to use Hester as an example to frighten any other would-be nonconformists from breaking the strict moral rules of Puritanism. Yet Hester's unshakable faith in herself, her love for **Dimmesdale**, and her devotion to her daughter empower her to resist and transcend enforced Puritan conformity.

In general in *The Scarlet Letter*, the conflict between individuality and conformity is also a battle between appearance and reality. Because the Puritan government is so harsh, all Puritans are always concerned about looking like conformists to best fit in. This means that they hide the reality of their human flaws, frailties, and sins in order to avoid punishment. The result are secrets that are the embodiment of the disconnect between private individual reality and the need to maintain the appearance of public conformity. And though keeping secrets provide a short-term solution for the sinner to avoid punishment, the novel argues that repression of the individual behind a mask of secret-keeping conformity will ultimately warp and destroy a person's soul.

3 PURITANISM

The Scarlet Letter presents a critical, even disdainful, view of Puritanism. The narrator depicts Puritan society as drab, confining, unforgiving, and narrow-minded that unfairly victimizes **Hester**. In the scene in which Hester is released from prison, the narrator describes the town police official as representing the "whole dismal severity of the Puritanical code of law," which fused religion with law. In contrast, he describes Hester as a woman marked by "natural dignity…force of character…[and] free will." It is precisely these natural strengths, which the narrator holds in high esteem, that Puritan society suppresses. In *The Scarlet Letter*, the Puritans appear as shallow hypocrites whose opinion of Hester and Pearl improves only when they become more of an asset to the community, most notably when Hester becomes a seamstress and **Pearl** inherits a fortune from **Chillingworth**.

4 NATURE

In *The Scarlet Letter*, nature stands in contrast to Puritanism. Where Puritanism is merciless and rigid, nature is forgiving and flexible. This contrast is made clear from the very first page, when the narrator contrasts the "black flower" of the prison that punishes sin with the red rose bush that he imagines forgives those sentenced to die. The theme of nature continues with the forest outside Boston, which is described as an "unchristianized, lawless region." In the dark forest, wild, passionate, and persecuted people like **Hester**, **Pearl**, **Mistress Hibbins**, and the Indians can escape from the strict, repressive morality of Puritan society. The forest, which provides a measure of comfort and protection that exists nowhere in society, is also the only place where Hester can reunite with **Dimmesdale**. When Hester moves to the outskirts of Boston, the **narrator** says she would have fit in better in the forest. Hester's choice to live on the border of society and nature represents her internal conflict: she can't thrive entirely within the constraints of Puritanism, but because of her attachment to society and to Dimmesdale, she also can't flee.

5 THE OCCULT

The first association most people have with the town of Salem, Massachusetts is the infamous "Salem Witch Trials." Set in and around Boston, *The Scarlet Letter* also deals with the specter of witchcraft and the occult. But the novel treats witchcraft and the occult sympathetically. By associating **Pearl** with other outcasts like **Mistress Hibbins**, Hawthorne suggests that witches were created by, and victims of, the excessively strict Puritan society. Puritan society created the witches by being so intolerant that people became interested in witchcraft as a way of expressing natural human feelings that Puritanism repressed. Puritanism then viewed witches as a threat to its repressive society and therefore sentenced all witches, like Mistress Hibbins, to death.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in red text throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

RED AND BLACK

Red symbolizes the glow of Hester's passion. Black represents the devil and sin. **Chillingworth**, for instance, refers to their shared fate as a "black flower." The inscription on the tombstone Hester and Dimmesdale share says "On a field, sable, the letter A, gules," which means "On a black background, the scarlet letter burns."

THE SCARLET LETTER

The Puritans mean for the scarlet letter to be a symbol of **Hester**'s shame. But the narrator describes the letter as a "mystic symbol" that means many things. The letter does represent Hester Prynne's adultery, but as she grows and changes in the novel, the letter's symbolism evolves as well. For example, it comes to mean "able" when she becomes a successful seamstress, and **Dimmesdale** refers to Hester twice as "angel," giving the letter yet another meaning. In the end, the letter comes to symbolize Hester's triumph over the very forces that meant to punish her.

PEARL

Pearl is a living symbol, the physical embodiment of **Hester** and **Dimmesdale**'s sin. In Chapter 19, the **narrator** even calls Pearl a "living hieroglyphic." Yet Pearl, from her name to her comfort with nature, is also the most pure character in the novel. While the Puritans see her as a demon, the reader comes to see her as a kind of nature-sprite, cast out by a society that cannot accept her "sinful" origins.

QUOTES

The color-coded and numbered boxes under each quote below make it easy to track the themes related to each quote. Each color and number corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

THE CUSTOM HOUSE QUOTES

It is a good lesson - though it may often be a hard one - for a man... to step aside out of the narrow circle in which his claims are recognized, and to find how utterly devoid of significance, beyond that circle, is all that he achieves, and all he aims at.

- Speaker: The Narrator
- Related themes: Individuality and Conformity
- Theme Tracker code:

CHAPTER 1 QUOTES

On one side of the portal, and rooted almost at the threshold, was a wild rose-bush, covered, in this month of June, with its delicate gems, which might be imagined to offer their fragrance and fragile beauty to the prisoner as he went in, and to the condemned criminal as he came forth to his doom, in token that the deep heart of Nature could pity and be kind to him.

- Related themes: Sin, Individuality and Conformity, Nature
- Theme Tracker code:

The founders of a new colony, whatever Utopia of human virtue and happiness they might originally project, have invariably recognized it among their earliest practical necessities to allot a portion of the virgin soil as a cemetery, and another portion as the site of a prison.

- Speaker: The Narrator
- Related themes: Sin, Individuality and Conformity
- Theme Tracker code:

CHAPTER 2 QUOTES

Stretching for the official staff in his left hand, he laid his right upon the shoulder of a young woman, whom he thus drew forward; until, on the threshold of the prison door, she repelled him, by an action marked with natural dignity and force of character, and stepped into the open air, as if by her own free will.

- Mentioned or related characters: Hester Prynne
- Related themes: Sin, Individuality and Conformity
- Theme Tracker code:

On the breast of her gown, in fine red cloth, surrounded with an elaborate embroidery and fantastic flourishes of gold-thread, appeared the letter A. It was so artistically done, and with so much fertility and gorgeous luxuriance of fancy, that it ... was of a splendor in accordance with the taste of the age, but greatly beyond what was allowed by the sumptuary regulations of the colony.

- Mentioned or related characters: Hester Prynne
- Related themes: Sin, Individuality and Conformity, Puritanism
- Theme Tracker code:

CHAPTER 3 QUOTES

When he found the eyes of Hester Prynne fastened on his own, and saw that she appeared to recognize him, he slowly and calmly raised his finger, made a gesture with it in the air, and laid it on his lips.

- Mentioned or related characters: Hester Prynne, Roger Chillingworth
- Related themes: Sin, Individuality and Conformity
- Theme Tracker code:

"Be not silent from any mistaken pity and tenderness for him; for, believe me, Hester, though he were to step down from a high place, and stand there beside thee, on thy pedestal of shame, yet better were it so, than to hide a guilty heart through life. What can thy silence do for him, except it tempt him--yea, compel him, as it were--to add hypocrisy to sin?"

- Speaker: Arthur Dimmesdale
- Mentioned or related characters: Hester Prynne
- Related themes: Sin, Individuality and Conformity, Puritanism
- Theme Tracker code:

CHAPTER 4 QUOTES

As he spoke, he laid his long forefinger on the scarlet letter, which forwith seemed to scortch into Hester's breast, as if it had been red-hot. He noticed her involuntary gesture, and smiled. "Live, therefore, and bear about thy doom with thee, in the eyes of men and women—in the eyes of him thou didst call thy husband—in the eyes of yonder child! And, that thou mayst live, take off this draught."

- Speaker: Roger Chillingworth
- Mentioned or related characters: Hester Prynne, Pearl, Arthur Dimmesdale
- Related themes: Sin, Individuality and Conformity

•Theme Tracker code:

CHAPTER 5 QUOTES

Thus the young and pure would be taught to look at her, with the scarlet letter flaming on her breast,—at her, the child of honorable parents,—at her, the mother of a babe, that would hereafter be a woman, —at her, who had once been innocent, —as the figure, the body, the reality of sin.

•Mentioned or related characters: Hester Prynne, Pearl

•Related themes: Sin, Individuality and Conformity, Puritanism

•Theme Tracker code:

CHAPTER 7 QUOTES

Little Pearl—who was as greatly pleased with the gleaming armour as she had been with the glittering frontispiece of the house—spent some time looking into the polished mirror of the breastplate.

"Mother," cried she, "I see you here. Look! Look!"

Hester looked, by way of humoring the child; and she saw that, owing to the peculiar effect of this convex mirror, the scarlet letter was represented in exaggerated and gigantic proportions, so as to be greatly the most prominent feature of her appearance. In truth, she seemed absolutely hidden behind it. Pearl pointed upward, also, at a similar picture in the head-piece; smiling at her mother, with the elfish intelligence that was so familiar an expression on her small physiognomy. That look of naughty merriment was likewise reflected in the mirror, with so much breadth and intensity of effect, that it made Hester Prynne feel as if it could not be the image of her own child, but of an imp who was seeking to mould itself into Pearl's shape.

"Come along, Pearl!" said she, drawing her away, "Come and look into this fair garden. It may be, we shall see flowers there; more beautiful ones than we find in the woods."

•Speaker: Hester Prynne, Pearl

•Related themes: Sin, Nature, The Occult

•Theme Tracker code:

CHAPTER 8 QUOTES

"Wilt thou go with us tonight? There will be a merry company in the forest; and I well-nigh promised the Black Man that comely Hester Prynne should make one."

•Speaker: Mistress Hibbins

•Mentioned or related characters: Hester Prynne

•Related themes: Nature, The Occult

•Theme Tracker code:

After putting her finger in her mouth, with many ungracious refusals to answer good Mr. Wilson's questions, the child finally announced that she had not been made at all, but had been plucked by her mother off the bush of wild roses that grew by the prison-door.

•Mentioned or related characters: Pearl, John Wilson

•Related themes: Sin, Nature, The Occult

•Theme Tracker code:

CHAPTER 11 QUOTES

Would not the people start up in their seats, by a simultaneous impulse, and tear him down out of the pulpit which he defiled? Not so, indeed! They heard it all, and did but reverence him the more. They little guessed what deadly purport lurked in those self-condemning words. "The godly youth!" said they among themselves. "The saint on earth!

•Mentioned or related characters: Arthur Dimmesdale

•Related themes: Sin, Puritanism

•Theme Tracker code:

CHAPTER 12 QUOTES

"Nay; not so, my little Pearl!" answered the minister; for, with the new energy of the moment, all the dread of public exposure, that had so long been the anguish of his life, had returned upon him; and he was already trembling at the conjunction in which—with a strange joy, nevertheless—he now found himself. "Not so, my child. I shall, indeed, stand with thy mother thee one other day, but not to-morrow!"

•Speaker: Arthur Dimmesdale

•Mentioned or related characters: Hester Prynne, Pearl

•Related themes: Sin, Individuality and Conformity, Puritanism

•Theme Tracker code:

CHAPTER 15 QUOTES

"Be it sin or no," said Hester Prynne bitterly, as she still gazed after him, "I hate the man!"

[...]

"Yes, I hate him!" repeated Hester, more bitterly than before. "He betrayed me! He has done me worse wrong than I did him!"

•Speaker: Hester Prynne

•Mentioned or related characters: Roger Chillingworth

•Related themes: Sin, Individuality and Conformity, Puritanism

•Theme Tracker code:

CHAPTER 16 QUOTES

"'Mother,' said litter Pearl, 'the sunshine does not love you. It runs away and hides itself, because it is afraid of something on your bosom.... I am but a child. It will not flee from me, for I wear nothing on my bosom yet!' 'Nor ever will, my child, I hope,' said Hester. 'And why not, mother?' asked Pearl, stopping short, just at the beginning of her race. 'Will not it come of its own accord, when I am a woman grown?'

•Speaker: Hester Prynne, Pearl

•Related themes: Sin, Puritanism

•Theme Tracker code:

CHAPTER 17 QUOTES

The judgment of God is on me," answered the conscience-stricken priest. "It is too mighty for me to struggle with!"

"Heaven would show mercy," rejoined Hester, "hadst thou but the strength to take advantage of it."

•Speaker: Hester Prynne, Arthur Dimmesdale

•Related themes: Sin, Puritanism

•Theme Tracker code:

"Doth the universe lie within the compass of yonder town, which only a little time ago was but a leaf-strewn desert, as lonely as this around us? Whither leads yonder forest track? Backwards to the settlement, thou sayest! Yes; but onward too! Deeper it goes, and deeper, into the wilderness, less plainly to be seen at every step! until, some few miles hence, the yellow leaves will show no vestige of the white man's tread. There thou art free! So brief a journey would bring thee from a world where thou hast been most wretched, to one where thou mayest still be happy! Is there not shade enough in all this boundless forest to hide thy heart from the gaze of Roger Chillingworth?"

•Speaker: Hester Prynne

•Mentioned or related characters: Arthur Dimmesdale, Roger Chillingworth

•Related themes: Sin, Individuality and Conformity, Puritanism, Nature

•Theme Tracker code:

CHAPTER 18 QUOTES

But Hester Prynne, with a mind of native courage and activity, and for so long a period not merely estranged, but outlawed, from society, had habituated herself to such latitude of speculation as was altogether foreign to the clergyman. She had wandered, without rule or guidance, in a moral wilderness.... The scarlet letter was her passport into regions where other women dared not tread. Shame, Despair, Solitude! These had been her teachers,—stern and wild ones,—and they had made her strong, but taught her much amiss.

•Mentioned or related characters: Hester Prynne

•Related themes: Sin, Individuality and Conformity, Puritanism

•Theme Tracker code:

CHAPTER 19 QUOTES

"Doth he love us?" said Pearl, looking up with acute intelligence into her mother's face. "Will he go back with us, hand in hand, we three together, into the town?"

"Not now, dear child," answered Hester. "But in days to come he will walk hand in hand with us. We will have a home and fireside of our own; and thou shalt sit upon his knee; and he will teach thee many things, and love thee dearly. Thou wilt love him; wilt thou not?"

"And will he always keep his hand over his heart?" inquired Pearl.

- **Speaker**: Hester Prynne, Pearl
- **Mentioned or related characters**: Arthur Dimmesdale
- **Related themes**: Sin, Individuality and Conformity, Nature
- **Theme Tracker code**:

CHAPTER 22 QUOTES

"Mother," said [Pearl], "was that the same minister that kissed me by the brook?"
"Hold thy peace, dear little Pearl!" whispered her mother. "We must not always talk in the market-place of what happens to us in the forest.

- **Speaker**: Hester Prynne, Pearl
- **Mentioned or related characters**: Arthur Dimmesdale
- **Related themes**: Individuality and Conformity
- **Theme Tracker code**:

CHAPTER 23 QUOTES

Pearl kissed his lips. A spell was broken. The great scene of grief, in which the wild infant bore a part, had developed all her sympathies; and as her tears fell upon her father's cheek, they were the pledge that she would grow up amid human joy and sorrow, nor for ever do battle with the world, but be a woman in it. Towards her mother, too, Pearl's errand as a messenger of anguish was all fulfilled.

- **Mentioned or related characters**: Hester Prynne, Pearl, Arthur Dimmesdale
- **Related themes**: Sin, Individuality and Conformity, Puritanism, Nature, The Occult
- **Theme Tracker code**:

CHAPTER 24 QUOTES

But there was a more real life for Hester Prynne here, in New England, than in that unknown region where Pearl had found a home. Here had been her sin; here, her sorrow; and here was yet to be her penitence. She had returned, therefore, and resumed,—of her own free will, for not the sternest magistrate of that iron period would have imposed it,—resumed the symbol of which we have related so dark a tale. Never afterwards did it quit her bosom. But ... the scarlet letter ceased to be a stigma which attracted the world's scorn and bitterness, and became a type of something to be sorrowed over, and looked upon with awe, and yet with reverence, too.

- **Mentioned or related characters**: Hester Prynne, Pearl
- **Related themes**: Sin, Individuality and Conformity
- **Theme Tracker code**:

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded and numbered boxes under each row of Summary and Analysis below make it easy to track the themes throughout the work. Each color and number corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

THE CUSTOM HOUSE

A nameless **narrator** (who has a similar biography to Hawthorne) describes his job as chief executive officer of a Custom House, the place where taxes were paid on imported goods. The narrator describes his Custom House colleagues as "wearisome old souls" and Salem, the town where it was located, as old and run-down.

Setting the story in Salem, the site of the Salem Witch Trials, begins the novel's critique of Puritan severity. The narrator's negative description of his colleagues shows his feelings about conformity.

One rainy day, the **narrator** discovered a peculiar package in the upstairs storage area of the Custom House. The package contained a piece of fabric with a red letter "A" affixed to it along with several pages explaining the history of the letter. The narrator says this discovery formed the core of the story that he will now tell in *The Scarlet Letter*.

Note that the scarlet letter survives hundreds of years after Hester Prynne and the Puritans have perished. The symbol endures even after those who created it have vanished.

The **narrator** mentions that he's since lost his job at the Custom House. He draws a distinction between his "figurative self," whom the public would expect to be dismayed by the lost job, and the "real human being" who welcomed the changes in his life that allowed him to become "again a literary man."

The narrator's split public and private identity mirrors Hester and Dimmesdale's experience of the pressure to conform to the public expectations of the community.

The narrator says he now has the time to write *The Scarlet Letter*, a story he feels obligated to tell the world. He hopes to make his own mark as a writer and be remembered as a "scribbler of bygone days."

The narrator writes with a sense of purpose: he hopes to teach the lessons of Hester's ordeal to generations of readers. He also seeks fame.

CHAPTER 1

A crowd of men and women assembles near a dilapidated wooden prison. The **narrator** remarks that the founders of every new settlement have always sought first to build a prison and a graveyard. He adds that this particular prison was most likely built upon the founding of Boston and describes prisons as the "black flower of civilized society."

Prisons are a "black flower" because though they are meant to punish sin (represented by the color black in the novel), they would not exist without sin. Prisons feed on sin in order to grow.

Next to the prison door stands a blooming wild rose bush. The narrator imagines that perhaps the rose bush grows in such an unlikely place to offer comfort to prisoners entering the jail and forgiveness from Nature to those leaving it to die on the scaffold.

The prison, a "black flower," contrasts with the beautiful rose bush, which grows naturally. The prison punishes, Nature and the rose bush forgive.

The narrator describes the rose bush as sitting on the threshold of the story he plans to tell. He then plucks one of the rose blossoms and offers it to the reader. He describes the gesture and the blossom as a symbol of the moral that the reader might learn in reading his "tale of human frailty and sorrow."

The Scarlet Letter's moral is that people must accept and forgive their own and other people's worst qualities. To deny those qualities, as the Puritans do, is to deny one's identity.

CHAPTER 2

The crowd outside the prison grows restless waiting for **Hester Prynne** to appear. The faces in the crowd are grim, yet familiar, since Puritans gathered often to watch criminals be punished. The narrator says that the Puritans considered religion and law to be almost identical.

Puritans, like the prison, are supposed to hate sin, but seem to thrive on it. They gather with a kind of grim fascination to watch sinners get punished and even executed.

Some of the Puritan women waiting outside the prison say **Hester** deserved a harsher sentence. One states that **Revered Dimmesdale**, Hester's pastor, must be ashamed that a member of his congregation committed such an awful sin. Another says that Hester should have been executed for her sin.

The comments about Hester paint the Puritans as cold and harsh. The mention of Dimmesdale's shame foreshadows his association with Hester and her crime.

Hester exits the prison holding a three month-old infant. The prison guard puts a hand on her shoulder, but she shrugs him off and goes out alone, with "natural dignity," looking proud, radiant, and beautiful.

In contrast to the crowd, Hester, the sinner, is natural and beautiful. She faces the crowd alone, as an individual.

On her chest **Hester** wears a scarlet letter "A," affixed with beautiful embroidery that strikes some women in the crowd as inappropriate. The narrator describes the letter in detail, noting that its "fertility" and "gorgeous luxuriance" pushed it beyond the Puritans' boundaries of acceptable dress.

By embroidering the letter, Hester transforms a badge of shame into a symbol of individuality. The narrator connects the letter to nature with the word "fertile."

Hester is tall, with a head of dark glossy hair, and a beautiful face with deeply set black eyes. She has a lady-like dignity, which the narrator says never was more powerfulor beautiful than when she emerged from prison.

Hester's appearance again contrasts with the drab Puritans. Despite her sin, or perhaps because of it, she is a vibrant individual.

As the crowd stares at **Hester**, the crowd focuses on the scarlet letter, which transfixes everyone. The letter sets Hester apart, enclosing her in "a sphere by herself" outside the watching crowd.

The letter isolates and distinguishes Hester. In a sense, it defines her identity.

As part of her punishment, **Hester** must stand before the crowd on the scaffold for several hours. Her walk to the scaffold is inwardly agonizing, though Hester never reveals her suffering. The narrator observes that once upon the scaffold, the beautiful Hester took on the image of "Divine Maternity," and yet her beauty also had the "taint of deepest sin."

Divine Maternity is a name for the Virgin Mary. Hester suggests this symbol of purity to the crowd only by contrast. But the narrator seems to imply the symbol really does fit her.

Governor Bellingham, a judge, and other officials observe the "spectacle" of Hester's punishment on the scaffold. The crowd, aware of the presence of authority, remains serious and grave. **Hester** feels the urge to scream at the crowd and leap off the scaffold, but she restrains herself.

Hester wants to rebel, whereas the Puritans all remain quiet conformers. The Puritans make Hester suffer to create a "spectacle" to scare people away from sinning.

Hester thinks about her past in order to endure her time on the scaffold. Lost in reminiscence, the harrowing scene before her eyes seems to vanish. Hester thinks about her youth spent in poverty in England. She envisions her parents' faces and sees also the face of a "misshapen scholar," her husband.

Hester overcomes being shamed by retreating into her own mind. Her sense of self serves as a shield against the Puritans' judgments.

Finally **Hester**'s thoughts return to the present. She looks out at the menacing crowd assembled before her. Hester touches the scarlet letter and squeezes her baby, **Pearl**, so tightly that Pearl cries. Hester then realizes that the letter and her baby are her only reality.

Hester is surrounded by symbols of sin: herself, the letter, Pearl. The letter splits her identity into a public self that the Puritans dominate and a private self she controls.

CHAPTER 3

Suddenly as **Hester** looks out into the crowd she recognizes **Roger Chillingworth**, her husband, standing beside an Indian at the edge of the crowd. She clutches her baby in alarm. It cries out in protest.

The person who should most comfort Hester (her husband) makes her feel uneasy and alone.

Chillingworth is "civilized and savage." He is small, intelligent looking, and somewhat deformed, with one shoulder higher than the other.

Civilized, savage, and deformed, Chillingworth contrasts with the nature.

Chillingworth's face becomes horrified when he sees that the woman on the scaffold is **Hester**, his wife. Chillingworth and Hester's eyes lock. He quickly places his fingers to his lips to silence her.

Chillingworth silences Hester in order to protect his reputation. He ensures he isn't associated with Hester's sin.

Chillingworth asks a man about **Hester**'s identity and crime. The man is surprised Chillingworth hasn't heard about Hester's notorious sin. Chillingworth lies that he's been held captive by Indians. He asks the man to explain Hester's crime.

Chillingworth seems almost cold-blooded, lying about his past while watching his wife suffer on the scaffold just to protect his reputation.

The stranger tells Hester's history. She had been married to a scholar from England (**Chillingworth**), but had arrived in Massachusetts alone while he remained in Amsterdam. She lived alone in Boston for two years before falling into sin and scandal.

Hester's independence results in part from her living on her own for years. Chillingworth essentially abandoned her.

Chillingworth asks who fathered **Hester**'s child. The man says that the child's father remains a mystery and suggests that Hester's husband come from Europe to investigate the matter himself. The man also notes that Hester did not receive the full "extremity of righteous law," which would have punished her with death. Chillingworth says Hester's sentence makes more sense because now Hester will serve as a living "sermon against sin."

The man's suggestion is fulfilled: Chillingworth has arrived, aligned himself with the Puritans' perspective on Hester's crime, and speaks as if he has no connection to his own wife. The mention of "righteous law" emphasizes the Puritan fusion of religion and law.

Chillingworth predicts that the man who fathered **Hester**'s child will eventually be revealed and repeats the phrase, "he will be known!"

Chillingworth condemns lying to protect oneself, but he's doing it too!

Mr. Wilson, an elderly local reverend, addresses **Hester** and calls on her pastor, **Arthur Dimmesdale**, to question her about her sin. Dimmesdale demands that she reveal the identity of her baby's father, but she says she will never reveal his name. Mr. Wilson then delivers a fiery sermon about sin, after which Hester returns to her prison cell.

Dimmesdale conforms to public expectation and demands that Hester divulge her lover's identity, but he lacks the courage to reveal that he's her lover. Like Chillingworth, he abandons her to protect himself.

CHAPTER 4

When **Hester** and **Pearl** return to prison, Pearl cries uncontrollably. The prison guards allow a doctor in to help calm her. Posing as a physician, **Roger Chillingworth** enters and gives healing concoctions to **Pearl** and **Hester**. Hester fears Chillingworth might actually be poisoning her, but drinks his remedy.

Though Chillingworth and Dimmesdale both sin by abandoning Hester, only Hester endures punishment for sin. Outcast and alone with Pearl, Hester can't even trust her own husband.

Chillingworth forgives **Hester** for betraying him. He asks her to tell him the identity of the father, but once again she refuses. He then asks Hester to protect his identity by swearing never to identify him as her husband. Hester remains suspicious of Chillingworth and thinks she might be sealing her own doom by agreeing to keep his secret, but does it anyway.

Hester hides Dimmesdale and Chillingworth's identities to protect them. Dimmesdale and Chillingworth conceal their own identities to protect themselves. Though a "sinner," Hester is selfless.

CHAPTER 5

About three years pass. **Hester**, now free from prison, decides not to leave Boston. She takes **Pearl** to live in an abandoned cabin on the outskirts of town.

Hester's sin drives her to the border of society and nature.

Hester supports herself as a seamstress. The same people who pay her for her work, including **Governor Bellingham**, continue to shun her.

Puritan hypocrisy: they'll employ a "sinner" to suit their own needs.

Hester grows increasingly lonely. **Pearl**, her only companion, is a constant reminder of the source of her alienation: sin. Hester is determined to keep the meaning of the scarlet letter a secret from Pearl.

Like Chillingworth and Dimmesdale, Hester conceals a secret. These secrets harm those who keep them and those from whom they're kept.

CHAPTER 6

The **narrator** describes **Pearl** as the human manifestation of **Hester**'s sin: Pearl is filled with a sense of defiance and deviance, and does not fit in among the other children of the community.

Hester has passed on her own defiant "sinful" spirit to her daughter. Pearl is an individual, not a Puritan conformer.

Like **Hester**, **Pearl** is painfully aware of her isolation. She has an innate sense that Hester's scarlet letter is linked to their rejection by society. She pleads with her mother to explain the letter's origin.

Pearl's obsession with the letter makes Hester think Pearl is possessed. But it's the secret surrounding the sin that obsesses Pearl .

The townspeople consider Pearl the physical embodiment of sin, an "imp of evil."

The Puritans condemn Pearl, an innocent child.

CHAPTER 7

Rumors surface that the authorities are planning to take **Pearl** from **Hester** because they fear that Pearl is possessed and dangerous to Hester. And if Pearl isn't possessed, they think she deserves a less sinful mother.

More Puritan hypocrisy. After shunning them for so long, suddenly they care about Hester and Pearls' welfare?

Hester goes to visit **Governor Bellingham** to inquire about these rumors and to deliver a pair of gloves that she has sewn for him. Children taunt Hester and **Pearl** on their walk to the Governor's. Pearl fends them off.

Hester serves people who persecute her. Like the scarlet letter, Pearl represents her mother's sin but also her individuality.

They arrive and find the **Governor**'s residence decorated with armor and dark formal portraits, relics from Bellingham's English roots.

Bellingham, a Puritan, lives like an aristocrat. More Puritan hypocrisy.

At one point, **Pearl** points out **Hester**'s distorted reflection in the breastplate of a suit of armor: Hester appears to be completely hidden behind the scarlet letter. Hester seems to feel Pearl's distance as they gaze in the mirror, and she again suspects that Pearl might be possessed by demons.

The Puritan community's treatment of Hester is beginning to overwhelm her. She now starts to believe the town gossip that Pearl is possessed, an embodiment of sin.

Pearl spots a garden with soil too hard to support the "ornamental gardening" popular in England, but which contains some rose bushes. Pearl begs for a rose just as the **Governor** approaches with other gentleman.

The garden soil is hard, just like the Puritans. Pearl's request for a rose is a symbolic request that Hester forgive her "sinful" origins.

CHAPTER 8

John Wilson, **Chillingworth** and **Dimmesdale** arrive at the **Governor**'s residence. The men tease **Pearl**, calling her a demon-child because of her scarlet clothing, but stop when they realize that she's **Hester**'s daughter and that Hester must be present.

The Puritans are hypocrites: they enjoy playing with Pearl until they realize she's Hester's child.

The **Governor** asks **Hester** how she can justify keeping **Pearl**. Hester says she'll teach Pearl what she's learned from wearing the scarlet letter. The Governor says that the letter is her badge of shame.

Bellingham sees the letter as the symbol of sin the Puritans mean it to be, not the symbol of individuality Hester has made it.

Mr. Wilson asks **Pearl** who made her. Pearl says that she was plucked from the rose bush just outside the prison door.

Wilson wants Pearl to answer God, but instead she answers Nature.

The **Governor**, alarmed by this response, suggests that they conduct a closer investigation into Hester's fitness as a mother. Hester says she will die before giving up **Pearl**.

If a three-year old doesn't say God made her, the rigid Puritans think her soul is in danger.

Hester begs **Dimmesdale** to defend her. Dimmesdale argues that **Pearl** was sent by God to serve as Hester's one true punishment and to guard her from sinning again. He points out that Hester even dresses Pearl in red, likening her to the scarlet letter.

Dimmesdale "defense" of Hester paints her as a sinner deserving punishment.

Chillingworth notes that **Dimmesdale** spoke with an unusual amount of passion and conviction.

Chillingworth suspects Dimmesdale.

Pearl approaches **Dimmesdale** and grasps his hand. She then runs down the hall. **Mr. Wilson** remarks that, like a witch, her feet barely touch the ground.

Pearl shows a connection to Dimmesdale. Wilson links her to the occult.

Dimmesdale's speech convinces the **Governor** not to take **Pearl** from **Hester**. On their way out of the Governor's residence, Hester and Pearl see **Mistress Hibbins**. She invites Hester to a witches' gathering in the woods with the Black Man, but Hester declines, saying she must care for Pearl.

After the Puritan leaders almost take Pearl away for being a "demon-child," it turns out that Bellingham's sister is a witch. The occult exists at the core of Puritan culture, but can only be exposed in the woods.

CHAPTER 9

The Boston settlement lacks skilled physicians, so the Puritans welcome **Chillingworth** enthusiastically for his apparent knowledge of both traditional medicine and Indian medical remedies.

Chillingworth fakes being a good Puritan. It's a sin to lie, but lying fools the authorities.

Dimmesdale's health worsens and he is seen often with his hand over his heart. **Chillingworth** treats Dimmesdale and soon the two move in together.

The novel's two worst sinners now live together. Sin feeds sin.

As **Dimmesdale**'s health wanes, the locals notice that **Chillingworth**'s has transformed from a kind, elderly, and somewhat misshapen gentleman into an ugly evil old man. The transformation makes them suspect that Chillingworth's intentions in getting so close to Dimmesdale might not be entirely charitable: they fear he might have been sent by the devil.

Both Chillingworth and Dimmesdale suffer physically for their inner turmoil. In keeping secrets to hide their sins and conform to social pressure, they cause their bodies, their natures, to wither and die.

CHAPTER 10

While serving as **Dimmesdale**'s "leech" (a term for a doctor) **Chillingworth** begins to suspect that Dimmesdale's condition may stem from stress caused by some kind of secret. He tries to find out this secret, but Dimmesdale refuses to divulge it.

Chillingworth recognizes the effect of secret sins. Yet he hides things too, and becomes an actual "leech" feeding off Dimmesdale's sin.

One day, Chillingworth and Dimmesdale notice **Hester** and **Pearl** in the cemetery outside Dimmesdale's home. Pearl is playing on the headstones and attaching burrs to Hester's scarlet letter.

Pearl's connection to the occult is here linked to her fixation on the scarlet letter. This fixation results from Hester's secrecy.

Pearl throws one of the burrs she is carrying toward **Dimmesdale**. She tells **Hester** that they should leave since the Black Man has possessed Dimmesdale and will get them too.

Identifying Dimmesdale as a sinner, Pearl throws him an extension of the scarlet letter. But is his sin adultery or silence?

Dimmesdale's health gets worse. **Chillingworth** attributes his illness to his secret, but Dimmesdale still refuses to reveal it. When Dimmesdale falls asleep, Chillingworth pushes aside Dimmesdale's shirt and sees something there that gives him joy. The narrator likens Chillingworth's touch to Satan stealing a soul.

Chillingworth, like the Puritans in general, maintains the appearance of righteousness but is actually a sinner, and feeds off the sins of others.

CHAPTER 11

Convinced that **Dimmesdale** is **Pearl**'s father, **Chillingworth** embarks on a campaign to make his patient as miserable as possible. Dimmesdale continues to suffer greatly and comes to hate Chillingworth for mistreating him.

The two secret sinners, Chillingworth and Dimmesdale, become lost in a vicious cycle of suspicion and hatred.

Dimmesdale continues to preach and delivers some of his most passionate sermons, which focus mostly on the topic of sin. He describes himself as a "pollution and a lie" to his parishioners, yet he does not confess and they continue to view him favorably.

Dimmesdale's sin lets him empathize with other sinners. The Puritans, though they are so concerned with sin, can't recognize a sinner.

Dimmesdale's guilt makes him hate himself. He punishes himself physically and emotionally, staying up nights thinking about confessing, and starving and whipping himself. His health crumbles, as does his sense of self. As the narrator observes, "To the untrue man, the whole universe is false." Yet the chapter ends with the suggestion that Dimmesdale has come up with a plan that might help him ease his suffering.

Dimmesdale's secrets reduce his identity to a shadow of doubt and self-hate. His secrets, kept to protect his public reputation, have made him internally "untrue." By this point it's obvious that relief can only come from confession of his sin.

CHAPTER 12

One night, **Dimmesdale** mounts the town scaffold where **Hester** and **Pearl** once stood to be shamed. He imagines the scene filled with townspeople. He cries out in anguish, but **Mr. Wilson**, who was walking by in the distance, doesn't see Dimmesdale.

It's clear now that Dimmesdale shares Hester's "sin." But he can only bring himself to experience privately what Hester endured publicly.

Hester and **Pearl**, returning from the deathbed of the colony's first governor, do spot **Dimmesdale**, and join him on the scaffold. Her eyes alive with "witchcraft," Pearl asks Dimmesdale to appear on the scaffold with them in front of everyone. Dimmesdale says he will only do that on "judgment day."

Dimmesdale hides behind religion ("judgment day") to evade Pearl's invitation to escape from his secrets. "Witchcraft" offers salvation while religion offers sin.

A meteor lights up the sky in what **Dimmesdale** thinks is the shape of an "A." **Pearl** notices **Chillingworth** watching them. Chillingworth, looking like an "arch-fiend," urges Dimmesdale to get down from the scaffold. He and Dimmesdale return home.

Nature celebrates the scarlet letter. Yet Dimmesdale's goes with the "arch-fiend," He's chosen secret sin over punishment, repentance, and internal truth.

The next day **Dimmesdale** delivers his most powerful sermon ever. Afterward, the church sexton returns to Dimmesdale a black glove he found on the scaffold, saying Satan must have left it there. He mentions that other townspeople reported seeing a letter "A" formed by a meteor, which they took to stand for "angel" and to mean the dead governor has ascended to heaven.

More hypocrisy: Dimmesdale's sermons against sin get more powerful as his own sins increase, and the Puritans continue to be blind to the sinning in their midst. Note how the letter "A" means only what popular opinion says it means.

CHAPTER 13

Seven years have now passed since **Pearl**'s birth. **Hester** has become more accepted by the community, and the embroidered scarlet letter has evolved into a "symbol of her calling," not just her sin.

The symbol of Hester's punishment now is a mark of her personal skill as a seamstress.

Nonetheless, **Hester** still lives on the outskirts of town, her hard life has stolen her beauty and spirit, and she now dwells in the realm of thought and solitude, not passion. She doubts whether her own life is worth living, and contemplates murdering Pearl and then committing suicide.

Hester's reputation improves, but because of her sin Puritanism says she'll never reach heaven. By withholding forgiveness, Puritanism makes it pointless for sinners to stop sinning.

Hester decides that she must help **Dimmesdale** by confessing that **Chillingworth** was her husband, thereby revealing the vengeful motive behind his harsh treatment of Dimmesdale.

Hester, the "sinner" intends to save Dimmesdale, though "innocent" Dimmesdale never tried to save her.

CHAPTER 14

Hester decides to ask **Chillingworth** to stop tormenting Dimmesdale. When she and Pearl encounter him on a beach near the sea, he tells her the council has recently discussed allowing her to remove the scarlet letter from her chest. She says the letter should stay until she's worthy of its removal.

Hester will remove the letter only on her own terms. Her remark about being worthy of its removal is a sarcastic jab at the Puritans, who seek to define her worthiness.

Hester notices that **Chillingworth** has changed. He's now a wretched, vengeful old man. Chillingworth also notes the change, remembering when he was a kind scholar. He says that he's lost his "human heart."

Chillingworth's secrets and his quest for revenge have made him inhuman, unable to forgive, and miserable.

Hester tells **Chillingworth** he holds **Dimmesdale**'s life in his hands. Chillingworth says he saved Dimmesdale's life by not revealing his link to Hester from the start. Hester says he would be better off dead than forced to endure Chillingworth's torture.

Chillingworth, and other Puritans, equates reputation with life. But Hester knows prioritizing reputation over the soul is killing Dimmesdale.

Chillingworth admits that he's become a "fiend." He blames **Hester** for his downfall. Hester agrees, pleading with Chillingworth therefore not to blame and abuse **Dimmesdale** any further.

Unlike anyone else in the novel, Hester is "true." She admits her mistakes and sins and takes responsibility for them.

Hester says she must tell **Dimmesdale** about **Chillingworth**. He responds that their fate, a "black flower," is no longer in anyone's hands. He apologizes to Hester for not having offered her the love that would have prevented their collective ruin.

Prisons are black flowers because they arise out of sin, which they're intended to contain. Similarly, Chillingworth intended to punish sin, but has instead become sinful himself.

CHAPTER 15

As **Chillingworth** departs, Hester thinks that though it's a sin, she hates Chillingworth for tricking her into thinking she'd be happy as his wife.

Hester prioritizes her happiness over fear of sin.

She rejoins **Pearl** by the seaside. Pearl has arranged seaweed to form a letter "A" on her own chest. She pleads with **Hester** to tell her what the scarlet letter means, and asks if Hester wears it for the same reason **Dimmesdale** covers his heart with his hand.

Pearl senses that understanding the letter's significance is crucial to understanding herself and her connection to Dimmesdale.

Hester lies and says she wears the letter because of its beautiful gold thread. **Pearl**, knowing better, seeks the real reason, and Hester threatens to punish her.

After advocating that Chillingworth be honest, Hester is "false" to her daughter.

CHAPTER 16

Hester plans to intercept **Dimmesdale** along a forest path as he returns to Boston on his way back from visiting an apostle.

In the forest, in nature, Hester can be honest with Dimmesdale.

As **Hester** waits for **Dimmesdale**, **Pearl** asks to hear the story of the Black Man, a nickname for the devil. Pearl adds that the Black Man haunts the forest with a book that his converts must sign in blood. The Black Man then places a mark on his followers' bosoms.

Pearl's fascination with the Black Man is motivated by the secrets around the scarlet letter. In this way, suppression creates what is being suppressed.

Hester asks how **Pearl** heard this story and she responds that an old woman told her the Black Man put the scarlet letter on her mother. Eager to settle the matter, Hester confirms the false story of the letter's origin.

Like Dimmesdale's lie about his glove on the scaffold, Hester uses the devil to hide her sin.

Dimmesdale approaches. He appears weak, and walks with his hand over his heart, where **Pearl** suspects the Black Man has also left his mark.

Pearl has identified the link between her father's sin and her mother's sin.

CHAPTER 17

Hester and **Dimmesdale** meet in the forest and hold hands. Dimmesdale says life with a scarlet letter would be preferable to his life of deception, since Hester is the only person with whom he can be himself. The rest is emptiness, falsehood, and death.

Dimmesdale knows that his secret sin and the split identity it creates in him is actually killing him.

Hester reveals to **Dimmesdale** that **Chillingworth** was her husband. Dimmesdale, furious, blames her for his suffering. But he then forgives her and says Chillingworth's sin was far worse than theirs.

Hester and Dimmesdale kept secrets to protect themselves. Chillingworth kept secrets in order to harm others.

Dimmesdale says living under **Chillingworth**'s control is worse than death, but he sees no way out. **Hester** tells him to consider a life beyond Boston, in the safety and anonymity of Europe. **Dimmesdale** says he lacks the strength and courage to venture out alone. Hester says he wouldn't have to go alone.

Hester gives Dimmesdale a solution to save himself that isn't confession: leave Boston and the Puritans with her. But note that this solution involves running from secrets, not confessing them.

CHAPTER 18

Dimmesdale decides to flee Boston with **Hester**. He calls her his "angel" and says he's been renewed. Hester flings away her scarlet letter and feels an enormous swell of relief.

In the forest, free from the pressures of Puritan society, Dimmesdale and Hester escape their sins and are free to love.

Dimmesdale and **Hester** discuss **Pearl**, whom Hester says she barely understands. Pearl, meanwhile, has been playing alone in the forest, where she fits in well among the wild animals. Hester calls her to come meet Dimmesdale, her father.

Unity with nature shows purity. The implication is that Pearl, and therefore her parents' affair, are not sinful against God. They only sin against Puritanism.

CHAPTER 19

Dimmesdale says he feared that **Pearl**'s resemblance to him would give away his secret—the narrator says Pearl is a "living hieroglyphic." Yet Pearl refuses to come to her parents when they call. **Hester** attributes her reluctance to the absence of the scarlet letter on her bosom. Hester puts the letter back on and Pearl accepts her.

Pearl's refusal to return to her mother suggests that sin, the scarlet letter, is a part of her mother's identity and cannot just be thrown away. It can't be run from.

Pearl asks if **Dimmesdale** will return with them hand in hand to town. **Hester** says he won't join them in public yet. Dimmesdale kisses Pearl. She runs to the brook to wash off his kiss.

Pearl won't accept Dimmesdale as her father unless he will publicly accept her. Pearl, at one with nature, always favors honesty and openness.

CHAPTER 20

Hester and **Dimmesdale** agree to flee with **Pearl** to Europe. As Hester makes plans for them to leave on a ship bound for England in four days, Dimmesdale feels changes coming over him, including the urge to speak blasphemously to strangers. He encounters **Mistress Hibbins**. She suggests they go to see the Black Man.

Dimmesdale's decision to flee has changed him, and even Mistress Hibbins recognizes his newfound freedom. But note that while his repression is breaking down, he doesn't act on it.

At home, **Dimmesdale** tells **Chillingworth** that the "free air" outside has done him so much good that he no longer needs the help of his medications. Chillingworth suspects instead that Dimmesdale talked with **Hester**, but feigns relief that his remedies have finally helped restore Dimmesdale's health.

Dimmesdale takes charge of his own identity and well being by dismissing Chillingworth, but to do so he lies. Chillingworth lies right back. Not everything has changed.

Dimmesdale throws the draft of his most important sermon into the fire and starts from scratch.

Dimmesdale's wants to start his sermon, and his life, anew.

CHAPTER 21

It's inauguration day for the new governor. **Hester** and **Pearl** await the procession of government officials, and stand near a bunch of Indians ("painted barbarians") and some crew members ("desperadoes") from the vessel that **Hester** will board with **Dimmesdale**.

The derogatory descriptions of the Indians and crew members make clear the intolerance of the Puritans toward outsiders.

The **narrator** remarks that the Puritan style of celebration lacks the grandness and gaiety that events like this had in England.

Puritans are always depicted in the novel as somber and severe.

Chillingworth walks over to and converses with the commander of the vessel bound for England. The commander leaves his side and walks by **Hester**. He recognizes her and says that Chillingworth will also be aboard the ship. Hester looks across the crowd and sees Chillingworth smile menacingly at her.

Chillingworth has been devoured by hate and the need for revenge. He is no longer human. His secrets and lies in the service of righteous revenge have made him worse than any "witch."

CHAPTER 22

Dimmesdale appears in the procession of officials and looks more energetic than ever before. **Pearl** barely recognizes him as the man who kissed her in the forest. **Hester** tells Pearl not to mention the forest in the town. When Hester and Dimmesdale see each other no gesture of recognition passes between them. Hester fears that the bond she felt had been restored in the forest was an illusion.

Hester quiets Pearl and shows no recognition of Dimmesdale because she thinks she needs to keep her love secret in order to preserve it. But that's the same logic that leads to lying to cover up sin, and which never works.

Mistress Hibbins approaches **Hester**. She says she can always tell a servant of the Black Man, and that both Hester and **Dimmesdale** are such servants. Hibbins also compares Hester's scarlet letter to Dimmesdale's habit of covering his heart.

The Scarlet Letter flips conventional ideas about religion and the occult. The occult stands for honesty, while Puritanism creates repressed liars.

Pearl asks **Mistress Hibbins** if she has seen what lies beneath **Dimmesdale**'s hand. Mistress Hibbins invites her to ride to see the Black Man (who she calls Pearl's father) to learn what Dimmesdale conceals.

Pearl is the daughter of the devil in the sense that she is unconstrained by Puritanism, not in the sense that she's evil.

Some Indians standing in the gathered crowd think **Hester**'s scarlet letter is a mark of distinction.

The scarlet letter contains no innate badge of shame.

CHAPTER 23

Dimmesdale awes the crowd with a powerful sermon that predicts Puritan New England will flourish as a chosen land of God. The crowd thinks that Dimmesdale's performance is made even more powerful by the weakness that has once again settled on him and made it clear he was verging on death.

The Puritans think Dimmesdale's sermon is inspired by God, but remain blind to his sin. Meanwhile, Dimmesdale now realizes that he is going to die.

After his triumphant sermon, **Dimmesdale** sees **Hester** and **Pearl** in front of the scaffold. He asks them to approach him at the scaffold. **Chillingworth** warns Dimmesdale not to "blacken" his fame.

This is the third scene on the scaffold. Dimmesdale has gone from denial to secret confession to public confession.

On the scaffold, **Dimmesdale** turns to **Hester** and says: "Is this not better than what we dreamed of in the forest?" He tells her God is merciful, and begs her to let him take responsibility for his shame. Supported by Hester and **Pearl**, Dimmesdale turns to the crowd and announces that he is guilty of the same sin for which they have punished Hester. As **Chillingworth** looks on in despair, Dimmesdale tears away his clothing to reveal a scarlet letter carved into his breast.

By protecting his reputation, Dimmesdale sentenced himself to suffering far worse than the public punishment he would have shared with Hester. By confessing, he escapes the prison he built for himself, and the one Chillingworth built for him.

Dimmesdale falls to the floor and asks **Pearl** for a kiss. She kisses him and cries, and narrator says her tears were a pledge that "she would grow up amid human joy and sorrow, nor forever do battle with the world, but be a woman in it."

Dimmesdale's confession couldn't save his life, but it does save Pearl. It connects her to humanity by revealing "human joy and sorrow."

Hester tells Dimmesdale they will meet again in the afterlife. Though Dimmesdale is not so sure, he dies crying out that God is merciful and thanking Him for putting him through the terrible trials and ordeals that led to this moment, his confession. The watching crowd murmurs in awe.

The Puritan God is a punisher of sin. But by confessing, which none of the hypocritical Puritans do, Dimmesdale discovers the mercy of God and dies content, thankful even for his suffering.

CHAPTER 24

People came up with various explanations for the origin of **Dimmesdale**'s scarlet letter. Some thought Dimmesdale carved it himself, as a penance. Others that **Chillingworth**, through magic poisons, brought it into being. Still others thought it developed naturally, from remorse. The town authorities stated that there had been no letter on his skin at all, and that Dimmesdale confessed not for a personal sin, but simply to teach his flock that all men are born sinners.

The first three rumors are all true: Dimmesdale carved it himself as punishment for his guilt; Chillingworth's poisonous hate increased its power; it burned him through remorse. The authorities' version is a blatant lie designed only to protect their own reputations.

The **narrator** says the story he's told has one moral: be true, and show the world your worst, or at the least, "some trait whereby the worst may be inferred."

To hide your flaws to protect your reputation destroys your soul.

After **Dimmesdale**'s death, **Chillingworth** lost his vitality and died within a year, leaving **Pearl** a share of his property in England and New England. No one knew for sure what happened to Pearl, but clues point to her having married a man, for love, in Europe.

Chillingworth was a "black flower" feeding on sin. With sin gone, he withered. Pearl ceased battling society and found a joyful life within society.

Hester returned years later to her cabin in Boston. She lived there for many years before her death and still wore the scarlet letter, which had taken on its own legend over time. She was buried next to **Dimmesdale**. Their shared tombstone bore a single scarlet letter on a field of black.

Hester accepted the scarlet letter as part of her. In death, the symbol's meaning changed again: carved in stone, the letter symbolizes her eternal union with Dimmesdale.

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